

Lieutenant John Vinciguerra FDNY EMS retired
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RESCUER RECOVERY

My name is John Vinciguerra. I am 39 years old and a father of four. January of this year I was forced to retire as a Lieutenant with the FDNY EMS command due to lung damage sustained during the World Trade Center disaster rescue and recovery. It was one of the saddest moments of my life when I had to turn in my badge and end an 18 year career. Prior to becoming ill I was in good health and able to carry equipment and victims both up and down many flights of stairs. I loved to be able to help people and felt I had one of the best jobs in the world.

September 11, 2001 started for me like any other day. I had picked up an overtime shift on the night tour and left work in the early morning. I went home and climbed into bed to grab a quick nap. My wife came and woke me up to tell me what was happening, and we watched the second plane hit the towers. I was wide awake in an instant. Along with my wife who is also an EMT, we grabbed our gear and drove to the city. I was told to report to my station just over the Brooklyn Bridge and began transporting personnel and equipment back and forth to ground zero. I worked at the WTC site for many days on the pile as part of the bucket brigade, treating people who were injured at the site, and supervising EMS crews from around North America. I averaged about twice a week doing 16-24 hour shifts each time until January of 2002. After that, it was just too difficult to be there. And while I truly feel blessed to be here and able to talk to you, and I know that there are many others in much worse condition than myself, I also know

that this event has effected me in three major ways, physically, mentally, and financially.

Physically: like many others I developed the “World Trade Center Cough”, and was given medication by the FDNY doctors. This was quickly changed by my private doctor. When my breathing continued to deteriorate, another medication was added. I continued to work and watch my lung volumes drop at my annual FDNY physicals. I became more and more run down but wanted to work through it. On April 30th 2005 that came to an end. After suffering at home for 24 hours hoping I just had a bad virus, I was taken to Robert Wood University Hospital in Hamilton NJ. I was hospitalized for severe respiratory distress and admitted to the intensive care unit. A scan of my lungs revealed a spot, and the oxygen perfusion in my body was so poor that they thought I had a pulmonary embolus, or blood clot in my lungs. Unfortunately this was not the case. What was happening, was that the scarring in my lungs from breathing in all of the toxins had become so bad that I was no longer able to move enough air, and my body was suffocating. I was also told that I now had high blood pressure, and I had stopped breathing several times during the night. I was loaded up with steroids, anti-biotics, and many other medications, and discharged a few days later. I currently cannot walk up a flight of stairs without running out of breath. My lung volumes run from between 30% to 60% of what they should be. I can not run and play outside with my children, I need to be cautious when the temperature or humidity changes, I am very sensitive to dust, pollen, and pollution, and I spend most of my time in my room with a hepa air filter which is my new best friend. I have to take at least seven medications a day that cause both fatigue and weight gain. Due to my sleep apnea I have to wear a mask over my face at night that blows air into my nose and keeps my airways open. Every time I put it on it causes my ears to pop as if I were on an airplane, and it has greatly diminished my

sense of smell. But it is much better than the prospect of suffocating in my sleep.

Mentally; since becoming ill, I have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Both related to post traumatic stress disorder. I have tried medication but the side effects only seemed to make matters worse. Luckily for me I have a strong marriage and my wife has been there for me. But the stress that has been put on me, our marriage, and our family is enormous. After I first reported my illness to the City of New York, my claim was denied. I was told that since more than two years had passed since Sept 11, 2001, that I was no longer eligible to file a workers compensation claim. As you could imagine, I was despondent at the thought of being left on my own. I felt that I had done all I could to help the City, and this country in its time of need, and now I was being abandoned. Fortunately the New York media was relentless in reporting both my case and the plight of others in similar circumstances. Legislation was introduced and passed in New York to extend the deadline to file a claim. Fifteen months after becoming sick and as legislation was taking effect, in July 2006 my case was approved on appeal. This event led the way to retirement and the end of my career. This was not how I pictured that it would end and is certainly a disappointment to me.

Financially; here there is a light at the end of the tunnel, but things are going to get worse before they get better. Since it took fifteen months for my case to get approved, I was responsible for all my doctors visits and medication co-pays. I was not working, and I was unable to pay all of the bills and continue to put food on the table. I was forced to sell my home to try to keep my head above water. It didn't take long for the creditors to start circling. Even now it has been over two years since I became ill, and a year since the case has been approved, but the New York City Law Dept still has not paid the bills that accumulated. My original Pulmonologist told me a year

ago that he would not be able to see me anymore because he had not been paid and he still has not been paid to this day. In May of 2007 I applied for Social Security Disability. After following up with several phone calls, I was told in August that despite all of the documentation and the fact that I was forced to retire for my respiratory problems, I would have to be sent for an anxiety evaluation, and the earliest appointment was the end of September. On top of all of this, although I was granted a pension, I will not come off of payroll for the FDNY on September 26 2007, then I will have to wait until November 2007 to get my first check from the pension department. And when it does arrive, it will only be a partial payment (less than half) for the first three to six months until the final numbers can be adjusted. Since I have a bi-weekly pay mortgage, I am trying to work with my bank so as not to miss two payments. I tried to take a pension loan, but since I am so near retirement, It is now considered a “disbursement” and I cannot take it until I retire. On top of that, it needs to be sent out as a check and will not arrive for 30-45 days. I also looked into refinancing my current mortgage, but due to the late medical bills, the banks want over 10% for a new loan. It will be a long time before I recover financially.

While I feel that it is a good thing that hearings such as this are taking place, and it is comforting that so many people are concerned with me and my fellow recovery workers, there still remains much to be done. More money is needed not just for monitoring, but for treatment of the symptoms and conditions that are discovered. Financial assistance needs to be provided to help those in need whether temporary or permanently. An advocate should be appointed to help cut through the red tape that is facing not just the responders, but also the residents and school children that were also effected, because what good is a program if the people that need it the most don't know it is there or cannot get it to work for them. The WTC Captive insurance fund

should be abolished and replaced with a compensation fund or another program that will put the money to use where it is needed. It is disgraceful that the lead administrator is being paid \$300,000.00 per year to run a hostile fund that is throwing tens of millions of dollars at lawyers to prevent giving financial support to those it was created for. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

John Vinciguerra